

Seven pieces on nihilism

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143. Forms of nihilism

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Here I start a series on nihilism: what does it mean, what forms are there, what responses to it, how can one move beyond nihilism, what did Nietzsche propose for that move, and what is my proposal? Here, I elaborate on item 19 of this blog, with the title 'Beyond nihilism: Imperfection on the move'. I use bits from a book with that title that I am writing.

Western culture has harboured a deep urge, and still lingers in that urge, towards the certainty of ideals or values that are objective, i.e. 'outside' or independent from human cognition and inclinations, and absolute, that is: universal, unconditional, regardless of conditions and interests, and immutable, in other words applying everywhere and forever. This urge has been shaken by *nihilism*.

Nihilism is a complex notion, with a variety of meanings and interpretations. Karen Carr gave the overall characterization that I like best: 'Loss of all sense of contact with what is ultimately true or meaningful'¹. This loss has led to despair, in a loss of meaning in life, a feeling that life is not worth living. This is called *Existential nihilism*. It is a derived form of nihilism, following from loss of faith in the old, absolute values, or in human ability to live by them, or both. This can result in despair, if the old ideals are maintained, or in disorientation, if the desirability of the old ideas is in doubt or rejected.²

Nihilistic anxiety is not new, and arose before Nietzsche, but the spectre of nihilism manifested itself more openly and radically in his work, and it has been haunting philosophy ever since.

There are different forms of nihilism, according to the type of values lost. *Religious nihilism* results from loss of God, *ontological nihilism* from loss of reality as independent from human consciousness, *epistemological nihilism* from loss of objective knowledge, *ethical nihilism* from loss of objective morality, and *aesthetic nihilism* from loss of objective standards of beauty.

Epistemological nihilism can be traced to the scepticism of the ancient philosopher Pyrrho, and to the later Kantian revolution. According to Kant we can only perceive and interpret the world according to categories of time, space and causality that we impose. We have no access to objective reality as it is in itself. This destroys the *correspondence* view of truth as a correspondence between ideas and items in reality.

¹ Karen Carr, *The banalization of nihilism*, State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 2.

² I adopt this distinction between despair and disorientation from Bernard Reginster, *The affirmation of life; Nietzsche on overcoming nihilism*, Harvard University Press, 2006.

Kant did propound absolute standards of ethics, such as the *categorical imperative*, a form of the ancient *golden rule*: do (not) do unto others that you (do not) want done to yourself. The underlying idea is that reasons are sufficient only when based on absolute values, and that reason can grasp them, standing apart from inclinations and interests.

Nietzsche demolished absolutes in all areas, of God, knowledge, ethics and art. The basic idea is that claims to knowledge, ethics and art are always, inevitably, based on some contingent, non-absolute perspective, associated with interests, which could be different but nevertheless yields sufficient reasons.

For Nietzsche, the point was not only that the old absolutes couldn't be achieved but, more importantly, that they pervert, thwart life. What room is there for life and humanity, for creativity and invention, and corresponding error, when we are bound by universal, immutable ideas? In particular, Nietzsche rejected the morality of compassion and altruism, as hypocritical, a revolt of the weak against the strong, which destroys excellence and flourishing of life.

There is a distinction between *weak nihilism*: regretful loss of belief, and *strong nihilism*: no longer seeing such belief as desirable. Could one not make a step from disorientation to re-orientation, on the basis of values that are no longer claimed to be objective and/or absolute? Would that still be nihilism?

Nietzsche did not simply reject the old values as irrelevant, deserving indifference, as later postmodernists did (such as Richard Rorty). He also rejected indifference with respect to values, and passiveness, hedonism, and stoicism as an escape from the despair of nihilism. In his view that was as 'decadent', i.e. life thwarting, as the old absolutes.

He acknowledged the need for man to seek value and meaning, and rather than rejecting all values that go beyond the self, he sought a 'Revaluation of all values', with values that are not absolute and yet contribute to the flourishing of life. This offers an escape from nihilistic despair, but the despair was needed to propel this revaluation. What that revaluation entails I will discuss in a later item in this series.

144. Responses to nihilism: faith, resignation and revolution published 4-5-2014

Marmysz³ defined 'pure' or 'radical' nihilism according to three characteristics:

1. Humans are unable to achieve absolute values of God, the true, the good and the beautiful.
2. This is not how it should be
3. There is nothing we can do about it

In combination these three points yield despair and the feeling that life is pointless. Responses to nihilism can be deduced as deviations from one or more of these premises.

³ Marmysz, 2003, *Laughing at nothing; Humor as a response to nihilism*, State University of New York Press.

A first type of response is to accept 1, maintaining absolute values, and drop 2, accepting that they cannot be achieved. Kierkegaard did this, and in a related fashion, so did Karl Barth (in his early work) and the ‘dialectical theologians’⁴. Here, nihilistic despair produces a leap of faith. Despair of grasping God and approaching the absolute, in a ‘sickness unto death’, yields a positive impulse, evoking all the more awe for the absolute and infinite, and inspiring utmost dedication to it. Not being able to grasp God we should surrender to him. Paradoxically, despair is needed to leap into faith but then despair is also relieved.

From a more mundane positive perspective, inability to achieve perfection is seen as normal in human life, and it can serve to incite all the more effort, and may strengthen one’s resolve to continue striving. To deal with the discrepancy between absolute values and our inability to achieve them, Marmysz proposed humour and laughter. That yields pleasure in discrepancies.

In a more passive as well as negative response, one can dodge despair by trying to ignore it and let oneself be engulfed in the trivia of daily life, in conformism to the powers of habit and custom, in what Nietzsche called ‘the herd’ and Heidegger called ‘das Man’ (the ‘one’ in the sense of what ‘one does’).

One may also seek recourse to hedonism, distract oneself in seeking pleasure.

Or one can also face despair and resign to it, accept imperfections, and try to make oneself immune to the resulting vulnerabilities and uncertainties of life, as the Stoics did, and Schopenhauer, in *ataraxia*.

The existentialist response (Sartre, Camus) is to have the courage to face up to despair, accepting the pointlessness of human life, but with some appreciation for its absurdity, with humanist sympathy for the predicament people are in together, even as an opportunity for emancipation.

A second type of response is to reject point 3, that there is nothing we can do about it, and to take action. This may take a violent, anarchistic, iconoclastic form of aiming to destroy the existing order that keeps us from achieving the absolute. The Russian anarchists come to mind (such as Bakunin).

Another option is to accept that absolute values are needed, and replace existing ones by new ones, in a revolutionary overthrow. Despair is resolved with the claim of offering an alternative, new absolute ideal, in a new religion or ideology that can be achieved, be it at the cost of sacrificing the existing order. This is often seen as nihilistic, but in fact it is opposite to it. It claims that we can achieve new absolutes, if we all make the necessary commitment and sacrifice. Such ideologies tend to be totalitarian, claiming the whole of life as its domain. They evoke missionary zeal.

⁴ See Karen Carr, *The banalization of nihilism*, State University of New York Press, 1992

Communism comes to mind, but also radical capitalist market ideologies. Communism needs no elaboration on this point, I think, but perhaps capitalism does. Its totalitarianism lies in the claim, and the mission, that market logic should apply universally, everywhere, regardless of history, society or culture, in commercial as well as cultural and private affairs.

A third, radical response is to reject that absolute values are needed or even desirable. That is the response of Nietzsche, and of postmodernists, such as Richard Rorty, but with an important difference between them. I turn to that in the next item.

145. Responses to nihilism: perspectivism

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A radical response to nihilism is to reject the claim that absolute values are needed or even desirable, and to seek life without them. Two forms are Richard Rorty's indifference and Nietzsche's passionate 'revaluation of all values'.

One can become indifferent, shrugging at nihilism. What is the point of regretting values that cannot be achieved? Let us rejoice in being freed from them. This is the stance of (some) postmodernists, notably Richard Rorty.

This yields a pragmatist view: ideas and actions are good if they are useful, contribute to a good life.

This entails *perspectivism*: what one considers valid or true, in some sense, or good, depends on one's perspective, which depends on history, circumstances, culture and personal perspective.

If the criterion for adequacy or validity is contribution to the good life, the question then is, of course, what the good life is and who determines that.

For Rorty that is a matter of consensus in some community, with different communities making different choices, without any perspective- and interest-free argument to adjudicate between them.

For Nietzsche the old absolutes were not just impossible to achieve but were inimical to the good life. Life entails variety and ongoing change of perspectives, and this is blocked by absolutes, any absolutes. For Nietzsche the good life is contribution to the flourishing of life, the furthering of human life and excellence, in an ongoing movement of self-transcendence and 'Dionysian' creative destruction, driven by the 'will to power'. I will discuss that in a later item.

Concerning knowledge, one can take refuge in epistemological scepticism, like Pyrrho, and later philosophers, such as Montaigne and David Hume. This scepticism can, but does not necessarily, lead to radical relativism: no claim to knowledge or truth is inherently better than any other.

An alternative to radical relativism is to accept that values can be legitimate and reasons can be sufficient without being absolute, while they are not arbitrary and are subject to debate and to improvement.

In pragmatism, absolute, objective truth is replaced by *warranted assertability* (which goes back to John Dewey). Something is to be accepted if there are good arguments for it, to be settled in debate. In pragmatism the central warrant for assertability is that it 'works', stands up in practice and furthers practical conduct.

As indicated, for Rorty the warrant lies in consensus in some community (in 'ethnocentrism'). Karen Carr argued⁵, correctly in my view, that this entails a surrender to conservatism, the status quo. And if there is no basis for adjudication between different perspectives, ultimately it is a matter of force, the right of the strong.

I would add that it entails a surrender to what Nietzsche called the 'herd' and Heidegger called 'Das Man'. It entails surrender to suppression by the anonymous power of institutions, illustrated by Foucault. It entails surrender to the prisoners' dilemmas in which society has increasingly been caught (as in the case of banking, discussed elsewhere in this blog), where individual morality is strangled in collective interest.

Nietzsche acknowledged that man seeks meaning and value, but rather than accepting them from some outside authority, man produces them. Is his ultimate value as contribution to the flourishing of life not a new absolute, a new metaphysics? Does it yield an escape from relativism? That is the subject for the next item.

146. Meaning nihilism

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Meaning nihilism entails that words and expressions have no individual, determinate and fixed meaning, regardless of context, but depend on perspective and situational conditions. If one endorses the *correspondence view* of truth that certain elementary notions or expressions correspond with elements in objective reality, then meaning nihilism is related to *epistemological nihilism*, the lack of certain, objective knowledge and truth.

Wittgenstein (in his later work) and Heidegger proposed that in our cognition and language ideas and words have meaning not as individual, isolated entities, but only holistically, as a coherent system associated with a body of practice and discourse.⁶

Wittgenstein called those constellations 'language games' and 'forms of life'. Heidegger called it 'Being' as acting in the world. Knowledge, language and practical conduct are

⁵ Karen Carr, 1992, *The banalization of nihilism, Twentieth century responses to meaninglessness*, State University of New York Press.

⁶ Cf. Lee Braver, 2012, *Groundless grounds; A study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger*, MIT press.

not grounded in abstract, absolute, objective, basic notions and logic. It is the other way around: practice is primary and abstractions follow. Understanding is not contemplation of truths but ability to perform a practice. Mostly, we do not rationally develop and justify beliefs before we adopt them but take them for granted as we adopt them.

One absurd consequence of predetermined meanings would be that all future uses are enfolded in the beginning, which is equivalent to saying that there can be no future. Meanings change along with the practices in which they arise.

We are socialized and cognitively formed in practices that are taken for granted and form our terms of reference, which have no outside foundation and we cannot step out of. We can only point to established practice, in some community or context. There is no ultimate justification. Rationalization remains *internal* to the practice, delving from within the terms in which the justification is made. At some point all we can say is 'this is how it is done'. Notions of right and wrong can arise only within, not between language games. One can say in chess that a certain move is illegitimate, but one cannot say that chess is wrong.

This response to semantic nihilism yields the same cultural relativism as Richard Rorty's response to nihilism more widely, discussed in the preceding item in this blog: judgement of legitimacy operates only within cultures.

This is reminiscent of a famous debate in the philosophy of science, with Thomas Kuhn's notion of *incommensurability* between different *paradigms*.

As before, in the preceding item this blog, my problem with this is that if all attempts at debate across language games, paradigms or cultures are renounced as hopeless, the result is either mutual indifference and isolation or a settling of differences by power and violence. That would eliminate the potential of variety for intellectual and spiritual growth, and it would entail surrender to war and conflict.

While I admit that differences can be so fundamental as to preclude any meaningful debate, I think that most of the time some commonality can be found, in some similarity of experience, from which with clever metaphors some bridges of understanding can be built.

Earlier in this blog (in items 57, 58, and 66) I discussed this in terms of *cognitive distance* and attempts to bridge it. I discussed *meaning* and its change in items 37, 36, and 37.

147. Beyond nihilism: Nietzsche

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Old absolutes have produced their own demise. Religious transcendence led to a sacrifice of the self, a denial of earthly life and of the body. Nietzsche called it a form of decadence. And the relentless search for truth led to the discovery that we cannot know objective, absolute truth. To tell the truth: we cannot tell the truth.

According to Nietzsche the despair of nihilism should not produce a flight into triviality, hedonism, or indifference, which would constitute another form of decadence. Despair can be positive, producing a novel perspective, in a 'revaluation of all values'. Nietzsche preached truth relativism but not value relativism.

Reginster⁷ proposed that a revaluation of all values is contradictory, self-defeating, because it negates also the value, the perspective from which the revaluation is done. However, if one rejects absolute values of the true and the good, then, to avoid a search without end, an *infinite regress*, one must stop somewhere, and take some value for granted. But to be consistent one must allow for the need to arise to change that principle. That is the idea of *imperfection on the move*.

Now the most fundamental value in Nietzsche's revaluation is change, a perspective of 'being' not as a noun but as a verb, as an ongoing process of transformation, Dionysian creative destruction. And change would include the change of change, perhaps a negation of change, which again would be temporary.

As I have argued at several places in this blog, stability and change alternate, in processes of transformation.

The central principle producing change that Nietzsche arrives at is the 'will to power'. Reginster proposed that the crux of it is an appreciation of overcoming resistance, not just the acceptance of it as the price to paid for transformation, but the lust, the delight, the relish of it.

As the will to power is turned to the change of ideas, some of the old values of the Enlightenment re-appear: the virtues of intellectual honesty, integrity, open-mindedness, and autonomy. Inspired by classical Greek thought Nietzsche added values of contest, courage, excellence, creative self-determination, and self-overcoming. The highest manifestation of the will to power is artistic creation.

The ultimate goal to which the will to power is the instrument is the flourishing, the vitality of life, and the 'elevation and strengthening', 'the advancement and prosperity of man'.⁸ Here is the transcendent in Nietzsche's revaluation. However, it is not the transcendent of God or an afterlife, but the transcendent of a future of human flourishing. The crucial question for me now is whether and how this can avoid relativism. Why adopt this perspective rather than any other? Did Nietzsche raise the will to power to a new absolute, or is it also subject to change?

⁷Bernard Reginster, 2006, *The affirmation of life; Nietzsche on overcoming nihilism*, Harvard University Press.

⁸ Quoted in Nimrod Aloni, 1991, *Beyond nihilism: Nietzsche's healing and edifying philosophy*, University Press of America, p. 28.

Reginster argued that Nietzsche's stance was 'fictionalist'. Values are to be taken seriously, not ironically, as if they were absolute, in a suspension of disbelief, demanding commitment, without, however, falling back on any claim of absolute validity.

This seriousness is found in how children play ('and then you were the princess, and I the slayer of dragons ...'), and how rules of games are observed. They are taken seriously, with full commitment, and with indignation when the rules are not observed, even while one is aware that they are not 'really true' or even relevant outside the game.

This make-belief and self-delusion would have been quite a step for someone as committed to the courage of ever seeking and facing the truth as Nietzsche was, and therefore I find it difficult to accept.

My view on the matter is as follows. As I indicated, the underlying, more fundamental value of Nietzschean philosophy lies in ongoing change. I think this must imply that the will to power is subject to revision. Indeed, I think that Nietzsche himself would not have wanted it otherwise.

What would he have thought if he could have witnessed the atrocities, in the holocaust, for which Nazism had usurped passages from Nietzsche's texts (e.g. on the 'blond beast')? I suggest that he would have revised his views, not on the fundamental value of Dionysian creative destruction, but on the principle of the will to power.

So, what might a revised endorsement of creative destruction, with a successor to will to power look like? That is the subject for the next item.

148. Imperfection on the move

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While I sympathise with Nietzsche's thought on several points, I deviate from it in several ways, to develop my perspective of *imperfection on the move*.

Like Nietzsche, I reject absolutes but take values seriously. I add that most often values are adopted tacitly, without any question of validity arising at all. I will return to that in a later item in this blog. But where critical reflection is possible and relevant, one can legitimately accept values (and truths), as temporary, currently the best we have, given language and largely tacit established notions, while remaining open to possible failure of our cognitive make-up and to the need for revision in the face of new experience, meanings, or arguments.

Instead of Nietzsche's Will to Power I posit a Will to Creation, including art as well as invention and innovation. That includes the need, and perhaps Nietzschean enjoyment, of overcoming resistance, but counter to Nietzsche, not as a fundamental value in itself, but as inevitable in creation. While for Nietzsche the will to power is primary, with creation as its highest manifestation, for me will to creation is primary.

Like Nietzsche I propose that one's own prejudice also yields a resistance one needs to overcome. Will to power should apply also to the self. However, Nietzsche sought that in rivalry with opponents. In contrast with Nietzsche I propose that instead of vanquishing others, one needs to be receptive and empathetic to them, to be open to their opposition. This is needed to achieve the highest form of freedom: the freedom to change what one wants to want, and to overcome one's prejudices. I argued this extensively in my book 'Beyond humanism', and in earlier items in this blog (49 and 60)

Here, I oppose enlightenment rhetoric of autonomous selves, in self-realization, and Nietzsche's extension of it into self-affirmation. Even according to Nietzsche himself there is no originary, unitary, given self to affirm. The self is multiple and in flux, and develops in interaction with especially the social environment.

As indicated earlier in this blog, I endorse the fallibilist view of pragmatism, and the related notion of 'truth' as 'warranted assertability', but with some modifications.

How relativistic is the principle of warranted assertability? The answer to the absence of absolute, objective values should not be relativistic surrender to the incommensurability of values from different perspectives but, to the contrary, commitment to ongoing effort at debate between opposing views.

The criterion of warranted assertability is not only success in terms of utility, but also success more widely, in debate, with arguments that mobilize all relevant knowledge and experience, including facts.

While accepting the impossibility of achieving certain, objective truth, I re-institute facts and realism, in a non-absolute, contingent fashion.

Facts are indeed perspectival and theory-laden, but they are mostly less arbitrary and more reliable than theoretical speculation. In my practice as a scientist I have encountered situations where the perception of facts did vary with differences in theoretical perspective, but also cases where one could agree on them to settle differences in theory.

I do not believe in realism in the form of correspondence between ideas or perceptions with items in reality, but I do endorse realism in the sense that our ideas develop, mostly tacitly, without our being aware of it, in interaction with reality, as a function of experienced success, and in that sense somehow reflect them, though not as in a mirror. What, then, do we 'have in mind'? I will discuss that in a later in this blog.

Finally, how could and why should one adopt the basic value of creation that I propose? I think we *do have* the drive and ability to creation as a result of evolution: it has given the human species an advantage in survival. I think it is *advisable* to adopt creation as a value for the flourishing of one's own life and lives after that. Why? Does flourishing human life have absolute importance? I don't know, but since we have life it seems best to make the best of it.

How all this works out in life and society has been the subject of a number of previous items in this blog.

149. Nietzsche as a pragmatist

published 9-6-2014

There is an obvious connection, recognized by many, between Nietzsche and pragmatism. What they share is perspectivism and contribution to life as a criterion for validity. But how, in more detail, do they compare?

They both reject the separation of subject and object, of thought and world, as well as the separation of fact and value, of 'is' and 'ought'. The subject develops its knowledge and ethics in interaction with the world, and truth is judged in relation to purposes of actions.

In mainstream pragmatism (of Peirce, James, Dewey), ideas are revised when they fail in their application. I add, and I am sure Nietzsche would have concurred, that ideas also arise to create or respond to novel opportunities.

Mainstream pragmatism assumes that in the end knowledge will converge, in the limit, to objective truth. Nietzsche, by contrast, thinks of an ongoing creative destruction without any guarantee or indication, or even sense, of such convergence, and I go along with that.

According to mainstream pragmatism truth, or adequacy, or validity, is judged on the basis of utility or success in practice. Of course, that depends on the perspective one takes. In a wider view of pragmatism not everything is focused on practical ends. For Nietzsche, merit of ideas lies not in their direct contribution to utility, indeed Nietzsche despised that criterion. The criterion of usefulness or success raises the question: useful for what?⁹ Lies and cheating can be very useful. Usefulness should be related to views of the good life. For Nietzsche that is life which contributes to longer term, supra-individual flourishing of human life, in spiritual growth, and self-overcoming. Lies and cheating don't offer that.

Earlier in this blog I adopted an Aristotelian virtue ethic, with multiple, often incommensurable values, including honesty, openmindedness, courage, integrity, and prudence, in finding a way between extremes, depending on conditions. One recognizes several of these values in Nietzsche.

I propose that one can debate dimensions of the good life across cultures and communities, often finding at least partial overlap, in some degree of family resemblance.

Some dimensions of the good life are incommensurable between cultures, and this is problematic but not necessarily insuperable. They can be incommensurable already within cultures and even within views of an individual. At least partial agreement need not be hopeless and there need not be surrender to power and force. The paradox is that

⁹ Cf. Rossella Fabbrichesi, 2009, Nietzsche and James, A pragmatic hermeneutics, *Economic Journal of pragmatism and American philosophy*.

while absolutes are supposed to provide the basis for adjudication between different perspectives, they do in fact lead to struggles of power and force, since they do not allow for leniency, compromise or hybrid.

Nietzsche would have railed vehemently against Rorty's brand of pragmatism, with consensus in a community as the criterion of validity. He would have denounced that as a vile manifestation of the 'herd mentality'.

Nietzsche would be less sanguine than mainstream pragmatism concerning facts and empirical science, wary as he was of 'scientism'. Here, I take a middle position, with the view that while in principle facts are theory laden they can nevertheless often serve to settle disputes between theories.

Pragmatism is sympathetic to democracy and religion, while Nietzsche is not¹⁰, at least not to theistic religion. If, however, one adopts a wider view of religion, as I have done in this blog, as a striving for transcendence including transcendence that is immanent, in this life, and horizontal, towards something bigger than the self, in this world, then I propose that Nietzsche would qualify.

What most distinguishes Nietzsche from pragmatism is his notion of the will to power, the overcoming of resistance as a value in itself. And I share the doubts on that, as I argued earlier.

¹⁰ See Richard Rorty, 1998, *Berthelot: pragmatism is romantic utilitarianism*, in Morris Dickstein (ed), *The revival of pragmatism*, Duke University Press, p. 21-36.